

In the Open Air

Katherine Smit Paints the Beauty that Surrounds Her

By Laura Collins-Hughes

Most mothers whose children show an artistic bent would be proud. Katherine Smit's mother surely was that, but she was embarrassed, too.

Of course, she had good cause. Out of the crayons of babes, as it were — the cruel truth spilling forth every time her big, fat friend or the one with the giant feet and shoes came to visit. Little Katherine, a portrait artist even then, drew them as she saw them.

At 7 or 8, growing up in Albany, N.Y., she was fascinated, too, by the man next door, who would draw anything she wanted.

"I thought that was the most wonderful thing. How could anyone want to do anything better than that?" says Smit, now 65. "I don't think I ever changed from that, from wanting to be an artist."

She has been one all her life, earning a bachelor's degree on scholarship at the Pratt Institute before going to work in the postwar textile industry for Eastman Kodak, which was experimenting with synthetic fibers. She dropped out of the fast-paced world of



"Lighthouse at Duxbury Bridge," a watercolor by Katherine Smit.

fashion to marry her engineer husband, Neil, and have five children, but she never left her art behind. Since moving to Duxbury 20 years ago, she has made quite a name for herself as a watercolorist, a portrait artist and a teacher. (Recently, this newspaper chose "Lighthouse at Duxbury

Bridge," a watercolor by Smit, to adorn its poster for subscribers, one of whom will win the original in a raffle.) Smit has even worked as a courtroom artist, covering everything from a mafia trial to a high-profile lawsuit by the NAACP.

One morning last week, she was in

teacher mode, leading a group of six students from the Duxbury Art Association down to the beach at the end of Elder Brewster Road. But the wind was too strong close to the water, so the group retreated to the street, where Smit chose as the day's

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Open Air Continued from Page 1

subject an old-fashioned cedar-shingle house with a wrap-around porch.

"I don't consider myself a house portrait painter, but I've done a lot of them," she says, setting up her easel before giving the demonstration that will start the lesson. "It's all the same. A portrait of a house or a portrait of a person, it's all the same."

What she means is the need to get it down accurately, and that she does, whipping off a startlingly quick pencil sketch as she decides what she will and won't put in the painting. As it happens, what ends up in the painting does not necessarily exist in reality. What's really there is only a starting point.

"Right away you want to fake it if you don't have flowers," she tells her students, suggesting some wild roses for this scene. But then she spies a clump of lilacs in front of the house. They're not in bloom yet, but they will be by the time she finishes painting them. And as for the clouding sky, well, it just doesn't suit her taste.

"The darned sky keeps changing, so I'll just mix up something nice," she says, blending blue and a bit of yellow on her palette. Splashes of purple explode on the paper where the lilacs would be, if only it were a few weeks later, and bright green grass stands in for a darker hue.

When she is done, the painting looks as if it had been made on a substantially more beautiful day than this one. She stands back to take a look at her handiwork.

"Not bad, huh?" she says. "That took, what, a half-hour, 45 minutes?"

To Katherine Smit, time is of the essence.

"I figure life goes so fast, it's over so quickly, I'm giving it all I can," she says later, sitting in her kitchen after the class. "I'm painting, I'm teaching, I'm doing as much as I can as fast as I can because I'm getting old. Maybe next week I won't be able to see."

But taking less and less time to properly render a scene is also a point of artistic pride.

"The people I admire the most, like Sargent and Homer and people like that, they painted plein air and they painted faster and faster," she explains.

It is the only way to capture the light, she contends, starting on a subject that she says is "almost like a war inside of me": painting outside versus painting from a photograph.

"It's almost a battle at this point with painters that believe in the light and those who don't," she says. "If a person is convincing

from a photograph, it can't happen. A person can learn to manipulate paint, but the heart or the guts or the passion won't come through.

"Now that doesn't mean that I'm the last word," she says carefully. "Everybody's entitled to their own opinion. But I'm convinced that that's the way it really happens."

But she is selective about her reality: faithful to the light, but



Katherine Smit works on a portrait of one of her favorite subjects, her daughter.

Staff Photo by J. Paul MacDonald

not necessarily the details. In her pastel portraits, she painstakingly renders the essential appearance of her subject, but she has been known to take small liberties. There was, for example, the overweight boy whom she slimmed down in his portrait. Seeing himself slender and handsome, Smit says, gave him so much confidence that he was inspired to lose the weight.

"I've done harelip. I've done one eye dragging," she says. "They're not there (in the finished portrait). I had one child who had a great big mole, and her mother was so happy that I didn't put it in."

As much as leaving those things out reflects Smit's personality, it also reflects the advice of the late Charles Mahoney, a watercolor and portrait teacher from Scituate.

"He said to me one time, 'Katherine, always paint beautifully,'" she recalls. "I remember thinking, 'There's enough ugliness in the world.' I don't want to paint ugly. I want to paint beautiful paintings and think beautiful thoughts. I'm Polyanna. I want the world to be beautiful."

And in her artwork, it is.

"They'll say, 'You'll never make anything as beautiful as nature.' Ha!" she scoffs, smiling. "You can put lilacs where there aren't lilacs."